

Fourth Sunday of Advent 2022 A

As you can see by this bag, I kind of over-purchased these buttons for a talk at last year's Men's Conference. They say, "Love Me Like Joseph Does." You're welcome to take one after Mass, but they deserve a little explanation.

As you recall, Pope Francis declared a Year of St. Joseph in 2021. The buttons started with my misreading of my own schedule and getting to Mayhew Lake earlier than necessary for the first Lenten Stations of the Cross. With some unexpected time, I sat in the quiet of the church before the tabernacle, and kind of out of nowhere, this is what Jesus said to me in that silence: "Love Me like Joseph does." I wasn't expecting that, and I had no idea what it meant. But it is a question we can each fruitfully ponder from this Gospel: *how does Joseph love Jesus?*

For a good while, I felt a little sorry for Joseph; he seems like an afterthought of sorts in the Gospels, and not a word of his is recorded. To underscore that Jesus is truly the Son of God, artwork would often make Joseph an old man and place him a distance away from Mary and Jesus and the shepherds, looking a bit befuddled. With a sinless wife and a divine Son, Joseph was the weakest member of the Holy Family, and that must have been its own kind of trial.

But Joseph loved Jesus as his Son, one who depended on him and no doubt loved him with a child's affection, a teen's respect, a young man's gratitude. It is true Joseph was the legal father, without a biological bond; but rather than minimizing his dignity, I think Joseph recognized that it highlighted God's trust in him – he had been chosen for this role, and that high calling moved him deep inside to rise to a task that no one else could fully understand besides Mary. As Pope Francis said so powerfully, *Mary trusted Joseph because he had saved her life*. He had to overcome his doubts, fears, uncertainties, and literally life-threatening dangers. He had to protect Jesus repeatedly – taking Mary into his home also

meant saving Jesus' life, for if Mary had been stoned as an adulteress, Jesus would have died as well. He had to find a place for Mary and for Jesus to be born in Bethlehem, overcoming scorn, rejection, and weariness. He had to flee with his family from Herod's threat and relocate to Egypt – here is the Son of God, the King of the Nations now a refugee and exile – and leave behind his family, friends, customers, workshop, his livelihood; find a new place; and start all over. And then perhaps a couple years later, just getting settled, he was uprooted again and returned his family home, which perhaps no longer felt the same. He lived each day with a baby, a toddler, a little boy, a teenager, a young man ... to teach Jesus the simplest things of life along with Mary, as well as his trade, even though this Child was the Word through Him all things were made. All of this was Joseph's love for Jesus as his Son ... the slow and daily work of creating a family of love and hope. To love Jesus also meant to love the people around Jesus.

But Joseph also loved Jesus as his God. He certainly knew the Scriptures we read, especially in Advent and Lent, about the coming of the Messiah. Looking at his small family, he must have wondered ... is this what they meant? Can God really be so close? Yet even if at times he was confused, as we all are in the life of faith, I can think of no greater tribute for a disciple's life than Matthew's conclusion: "When Joseph awoke, he did as God had told him." That is a worthy goal for us with every new day ... to get up and do as God directs us.

I still don't know just what Jesus was after in that word, "Love Me like Joseph does." But take a button and pray about it, and see what He means for YOU in your own Christmas this year.